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FM AMEMBASSY SAIGON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4703

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SAIGON 3238

REF: A) STATE 18639 B) SAIGON 2048

SUBJ: VIETNAMESE PRESS ACTIVITY

1. MISSION ELECTION COORDINATING COMMITTEE HAS NOT UNDERTAKEN STUDY OF PRESS OPERATIONS SINCE THE END OF CENSORSHIP. HOWEVER, THIS TELEGRAM SUMMARIZES GENERAL TENOR OF PRESS EDITORIAL AND ARTICLES IN POST-CENSORSHIP PERIOD.

2. AS NOTED REF B, SAIGON PRESS WAS QUICK TO RESPOND TO LIFTING OF CENSORSHIP. PRINTING NUMEROUS ARTICLES AND EDITORIALS DISTINCTLY UNFAVORABLE TO THE GOVERNMENT.

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DESPITE MISGIVING EXPRESSED BY PUBLISHERS ABOUT POSSIBLE GOVERNMENT ACTION AGAINST OUTSPOKEN NEWSPAPERS, AND RUMORS THAT MINISTRY OF INFORMATION CENSORS ARE WORKING OVERTIME COMPILING DOSSIERS TO BE USED AGAINST OFFENDING PAPERS, MOST HAVE MAINTAINED AN INDEPENDENT, AND IN SOME CASES CLEARLY ANTI-GOVERNMENT STANCE.

3. VIETNAMESE PAPERS HAVE GIVEN EXTENSIVE AND EVEN COVERAGE TO PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES. CANDIDATES' PRESS

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CONFERENCES AND PUBLIC UTTERANCES HAVE BEEN TREATED AS FRONT PAGE NEWS. ALTHOUGH THIEU, HUONG AND SUU HAVE TENDED TO DOMINATE ELECTION NEWS, THE OTHER CANDIDATES HAVE ENJOYED PRESS EXPOSURE FAR OUT OF PROPORTION TO THEIR VOTER STRENGTH. (THIS IS PARTICULARLY TRUE OF TRUONG DINH DZU, WHO, EVEN MORE THAN THE OTHER CANDIDATES, HAS EXTRACTED MAXIMUM MILEAGE FROM THE DONG HA INCIDENT.) A FEW OF THE MORE PROMINENT PAPERS ARE CLEARLY COMMITTED TO INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES (E.G. TIEN TUYEN TO THIEU, THOI DAI AND BINH MINH TO HUONG). HOWEVER, EVEN THEY HAVE NOT NEGLECTED RIVAL CANDIDATES.

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FOR EXAMPLE ARMY NEWSPAPER TIEN TUYEN HAS RUN A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH ALL ELEVEN CANDIDATES, IN WHICH CANDIDATES ARE ASKED TO RESPOND TO A SET OF TEN QUESTIONS. THE GVN HAS NOT BEEN IMMUNE FROM CRITICISM IN VIETNAMESE PRESS COVERAGE OF THE CAMPAIGN, EVEN BY THE MOST CONSERVATIVE AND GENERALLY FRIENDLY PAPERS. IN FACT PRESS CRITICISM OF GOVERNMENT HAS RISEN STEADILY.

4. SEVERAL ISSUES HAVE ATTRACTED SPECIAL PRESS ATTENTION SINCE THE END OF CENSORSHIP. THESE INCLUDE THE GENERAL QUESTION OF PRESS FREEDOM (SPECIFICALLY GVN MAINTENANCE OF NEWSPRINT QUOTA SYSTEM), UNFAIR ADVANTAGES ENJOYED BY THE THIEU-KY SLATE IN THE CAMPAIGN, AND THE DONG HA INCIDENT. WITH REGARD TO THE FIRST OF THESE, SONG (FERMED NEWSPRING SUPPLY SYSTEM "AN OBSTACLE THAT BARS THE PROGRESS OF LOCAL NEWSPAPERS". TIA SANG ALSO CRITICIZED THE MEASURE. DAN CHU ACCUSED GVN OF USING QUOTA SYSTEM TO CONTROL PRESS. DAN CHUNG NOTED THAT LIFTING OF PRESS CENSORSHIP DOES NOT MEAN FREEDOM OF PRESS BECAUSE GOVERNMENT HAS MAINTAINED "PRIVILEGE TO

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GRANT NEWSPRING QUOTAS.... ESPECIALLY TO NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS WHO ARE DOCILE."

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5. THOI DAI, WHICH SUPPORTS TRAN VAN HUONG, HAS BEEN MOST VOCAL CRITIC OF THIEU-KY ELECTIONEERING TACTICS. FOR EXAMPLE IT DESCRIBED THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE AS A "DAVID AND GOLIATH" CONTEST, BETWEEN "EMPTY-HANDED MEN AND THOSE WHO HAVE TREMENDOUS RESOURCES AT THEIR DISPOSAL." THERE IS "INEQUALITY..PLAIN AS DAY." WHILE HUONG MIGHT WIN IN FREE ELECTION, "SUSPICION IS JUSTIFIED AFTER EXPERIENCES ACQUIRED FROM DIEM-STYLE ELECTORAL FARCES." THOI DAI CONCLUDED THAT GENERALS SHOULD HAVE RESIGNED. (THOI DAI EDITORIALS ARE SOMETIMES WRITTEN BY NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DEPUTY AND MRS MEMBER LY QUY CHUNG. INTERESTINGLY ENOUGH, HOWEVER, CHUNG SPOKE WITH GRUDGING BUT NONETHELESS REAL ADMIRATION OF WAY IN WHICH GVN HAD HONORED ITS PLEDGE TO LIFT CENSORSHIP IN AUGUST 15 CONVERSATION WITH LONGTIME EMBASSY CONTACTS. PAPERS WERE SOMEWHAT WARY AT FIRST BUT WITH EACH PASSING DAY SINCE CENSORSHIP LIFTED EDITORS HAVE GROWN BOLDER REGARDING

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TYPE OF ARTICLES AND EDITORIALS THEY ARE USING IN THEIR PAPERS. CHUNG OBSERVED THAT CERTAIN PAPERS, IN AN EFFORT TO ENLARGE THEIR CIRCULATIONS, ARE PRINTING ARTICLES VERGING ON THE SCANDALOUS WITH A QUESTIONABLE TRUTH CONTENT. CHUNG FEARS THAT AS ELECTION DAY DRAWS NEAR, SOME OF THE JOURNALS WILL BECOME LIBELOUS TO THE POINT WHERE GVN MAY VIRTUALLY BE FORECED TO TAKE SOME ACTION TO RESTORE SOME DEGREE OF RESPONSIBILITY.) SOME PAPERS HAVE ALSO TAKEN A SKEPTICAL VIEW OF SCREENING PROCEDURES FOR UPPER HOUSE CANDIDATES, AND RAISED POSSIBILITY OF GVN PRESSURE AGAINST CENTRAL ELECTION COUNCIL.

6. VIETNAMESE NEWSPAPERS WARMED TO TASK IN THEIR COVERAGE OF INCIDENT AT DONG HA. ALL PAPERS GAVE FULL COVERAGE TO CANDIDATES' CHARGES THAT GVN WAS AT LEAST NEGLIGENT IF NOT IN FACT GUILTY OF PLOT TO SABOTAGE THE CAMPAIGN. FOR EXAMPLE, MOST VERNACULARS CARRIED ACCOUNT OF AUGUST 7 PRESS CONFERENCE AT WHICH CANDIDATES VENTED THEIR

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DISPLEASURE, AND MANY PRINTED ALLEGATIONS OF VARIOUS

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INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES. EDITORIAL COMMENT ON DONG HA INCIDENT RANGED FROM STRONG CRITICISM OF GVN TO MILD REBUKE. THOI DAI TERMED THE INCIDENT "SHAMEFUL", AND DOUBTED THAT IT WOULD HAVE OCCURED HAD THIEU OR KY BEEN ALONG. CATHOLIC DAILY HOA BING BLAMED GOVERNMENT (AS WELL AS LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND THE LOCAL CAMPAIGN COMMITTEE) FOR COLD AND DISRESPECTFUL RECEPTION GIVEN CANDIDATES IN QUANG TRI. THAN CHUNG QUESTIONED WHETHER, IN VIEW OF QUANG TRI INCIDENT, "FREE, DEMOCRATIC AND HONEST ELECTIONS" ARE POSSIBLE. PREDICTABLY, TIEN TUYEN AND NORTHERN CATHOLIC DAILY XAY DUNG WERE LESS CRITICAL OF GVN ROLE IN DONG HA AFFAIR. TIEN TUYEN CALLED UPON CIVILIAN CANDIDATES TO "LET BYGONES BE BYGONES", WHILE XAY DUNG CALLED INCIDENT MERELY "REGRETTABLE" (ADDING HOWEVER, THAT WHATEVER ITS CAUSE, "GOVERNMENT SHOULD DISPLAY MORE GOOD WILL AND SHOULD SEEK ALL MEANS TO HELP CANDIDATES.")

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CIA 04,DOD 01,SP 02,SS 35,AID 30,SAH 02,SAL 0 ,RSR 01,/140 W

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7. VIETNAMESE NEWSPAPERS HAVE TENDED TO PLAY BACK FULL ACCOUNTS OF DONG HA INCIDENT AND ITS AFTERMATH AS REPORTED BY US PAPERS AND WIRE SERVICES, WHICH UNFORTUNATELY HAS HELPED TO PROLONG LIFE OF THE AFFAIR. HOWEVER, AFTER FIRST GIVING FULL PLAY TO ALLEGATIONS OF GVN MISCONDUCT, PAPERS HAVE MORE RECENTLY TONED DOWN THEIR REMARKS, APPEARING SOMEWHAT MORE WILLING TO ACCEPT POSSIBILITY THAT DONG HA INCIDENT MAY HAVE BEEN CAUSED BY HONEST MISTAKES. (AT LEAST TWO VIETNAMESE PAPERS, SANG AND TIA SANG, HAVE RECENTLY COMMENTED ON U.S. REACTION TO THE DONG HA INCIDENT. BOTH TOOK LINE THAT U.S. HAS PERFECT RIGHT, IN VIEW OF ITS OWN STAKE IN

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VIET NAM, TO INSIST ON FREE AND FAIR ELECTION. HOA BINH, ON THE OTHER HAND, CRITICIZED EXCESSIVE US INTEREST IN THE ELECTIONS, POINTING TO THE "INSOLENCE OF CERTAIN AMERICANS WHO ARE PLAYING THE ROLE OF BIG BROTHER TEACHING DEMOCRACY TO THE VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT.") WHILE COMMENT ON DONG HA HAS BECOME SLIGHTLY MORE MODERATE, CRITICAL PRESS COMMENT ON THE ENTIRE SUBJECT OF ELECTIONS, AND GVN ROLE IN THEM, HAS CONTINUED AT A HIGH PITCH. IF CHARGES OF GOVERNMENT MISCONDUCT CONTINUE TO APPEAR AS IN TRAN VAN HUONG PRESS CONFERENCE OF

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AUGUST 15, OR IF ANOTHER INCIDENT OF THE DONG HA VARIETY OCCURS, THE VIETNAMESE PRESS CAN BE EXPECTED TO FOCUS ON IT AT LEAST AS INTENSELY AS WILL THEIR AMERICAN COUNTERPARTS.

8. AN ADDITIONAL ITEM WHICH MAY DRAW EDITORIAL COMMENT IN NEXT FEW DAYS IS GVN CLOSING OF DAN CHU NEWSPAPER. HOWEVER, LITTLE MENTION HAS BEEN MADE OF IT SO FAR, AND IN FACT NO LESS THAN THREE EDITORS, IN SEPARATE CONVERSATIONS WITH EMBOFFS HAVE EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT THE ARRESTED WRITERS WERE COMMUNIST AGENTS AND THE GVN WAS,

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THEREFORE, JUSTIFIED IN APPREHENDING THEM AND IN SHUTTING DOWN DAN CHU. IT SEEMS QUITE POSSIBLE THEREFORE THAT THE CLOSING WILL NOT BECOME A MAJOR ISSUE, PARTICULARLY IN VIEW OF GREAT ATTENTION NOW BEING GIVEN TO ELECTION CAMPAIGN.

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